The Watchman and Southron.

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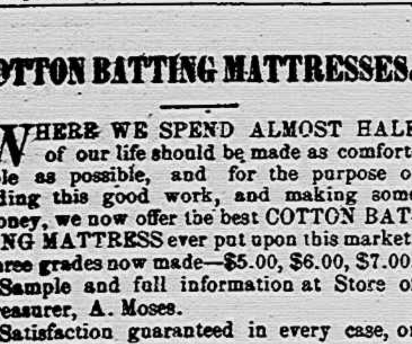

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Allan Quatermain

By H. RIDER HAGGARD.

AUTHOR OF "KING SOLOMON'S MINES," "SHE," "JESS," "THE WITCH'S HEAD," ETC.

[CONTINUED.]

This disaster left us in a very awkward position, as we had now no means of transport whatever, though, on the other hand, we had not much to carry. Ammunition, too, was very short, amounting to but 150 rounds of rifle cartridges and some fifty shotgun cartridges. How to get on we did not know; indeed it seemed to us that we had about reached the end of our tether. Even if we had been inclined to abandon the object of our search, which, shadowy as it was, was by no means the case, it was ridiculous to think of forcing our way back some 700 miles to the coast in our present plight; so we came to the conclusion that the only thing to be done was to stop where we were—the natives being so well disposed and food plentiful—for the present, and abide events and try to collect information as to the countries beyond.

Accordingly, having purchased a capital log canoe, large enough to hold us all and our baggage, from the headman of the village we were staying in, presenting him with three empty cold drawn brass cartridges by way of payment, with which he was perfectly delighted, we set out to make a tour of the lake in order to find the most favorable place to make a camp. As we did not know if we should return to this village, we put all our gear into the canoe, and also a quarter of cooked water buck, which when young is delicious eating, and off we set, natives having already gone before us in light canoes to warn the inhabitants of the other villages of our approach.

As we went we began to pass a considerable accumulation of floating rushes, weed, boughs of trees, and other rubbish, brought, Good supposed, to this spot by some current, which he was much puzzled to account for. While we were speculating about this, Sir Henry pointed out a flock of large white swans, which were feeding on the drift some little way ahead of us. Now I had already noticed swans flying about this lake, and having never come across them before in Africa, was exceedingly anxious to obtain a specimen. I had questioned the natives about them, and learned that they came from over the mountain, always arriving at certain periods of the year in the early morning, when it was very easy to catch them, on account of their exhausted condition.

Well, we set to work to stalk the swans, which kept drawing as they fed nearer and nearer to the precipice, and at last we pushed the canoe under shelter of a patch of drift within forty yards of them. Sir Henry had the shotgun loaded with No. 1, and waiting for a chance, got two in a line, and, firing at their necks, killed them both. Up rose the rest, thirty or more of them, with a mighty splashing, and, as they did so, he gave them the other barrel. Down came one fellow with a broken wing, and I saw the leg of another drop and a few feathers start out of his back, but he went on quite strong. Up went the swans, circling ever higher till at last they were mere specks level with the top of the frowning precipice, when I saw them form into a triangle and head off for the unknown northeast. Meanwhile we had picked up our two dead ones, and beautiful birds they were, weighing not less than about thirty pounds each, and were chasing the winged one, which had scrambled over a mass of drift weed into a pool of clear water beyond. Finding a difficulty in forcing the canoe through the rubbish, I told our only remaining Wakwafi servant, whom I knew to be an excellent swimmer, to jump over, dive under the drift, and catch him, knowing that as there were no crocodiles in this lake he could come to no harm. Entering into the fun of the thing the man did so, and soon was dodging about after the winged swan in fine style, getting gradually nearer to the rock wall, against which the water washed as he did so.

Suddenly he gave up swimming after the swan, and began to cry out that he was being carried away; and indeed we saw that, though he was swimming with all his strength toward us, he was being drawn slowly toward the precipice. With a few desperate strokes of our paddles we pushed the canoe through the crust of drift and rowed toward the man as hard as we could, but, fast as we went, he was drawn faster toward the rock. Suddenly I saw that before us, just rising eighteen inches or so above the surface of the lake, was what looked like the top of the arch of a submerged cave or railway tunnel. Evidently, from the water mark on the rock several feet above it, it was generally entirely submerged; but there had been a dry season, and the cold had prevented the snow from melting as freely as usual, so the lake was low and the arch showed. Toward this arch our poor servant was being sucked with frightful rapidity. He was not more than twenty paces from it, and we were about thirty when I saw it, and with little help from us the canoe flew along after him. He struggled bravely, and I thought that we should have saved him, when suddenly I perceived an expression of despair come upon his face, and there before our eyes he was sucked down into the cruel, swirling, blue depths, and vanished; at the same moment I felt our canoe seized as with a mighty hand and propelled with resistless force toward the rock.

We realized our danger now, and rowed, or rather paddled, furiously in our attempt to get out of the vortex. In vain; in another second we were flying straight for the arch like an arrow, and I thought that we were lost. Luckily, I retained sufficient presence of mind to shout out, instantly setting the example by throwing myself into the bottom of the canoe, "Down on your faces—down!" and the others had the sense to take the hint. In another instant there was a grinding noise, and the boat was pushed down till the water began to trickle over the sides, and I thought that we were gone. But no; suddenly the grinding ceased, and we could again feel the canoe flying along. I turned my head a little—I dared not lift it—and looked up. By the feeble light that yet reached the canoe I could make out that a dense arch of rock hung just over our heads, and that was all. In another minute I could not even make out as much as that, for the faint light had merged into shadow, and the shadows had been swallowed up in darkness utter and complete.

For an hour or so we lay there, not daring to lift our heads for fear lest the brains should be dashed out of them, and scarcely able to speak even, on account of the noise of the rushing water which drowned our voices. Not, indeed, that we had much inclination to speak, seeing that we were overwhelmed by the awfulness of our position and the imminent fear of instant death, either by being dashed against the sides of the cavern or on a rock, or being sucked down in the raging waters, or perhaps asphyxiated by want of air. All of these and many other modes of death presented themselves to my imagination as I lay at the bottom of the canoe listening to the swirl of the hurrying waters, which ran whither we knew not. One other sound only could I hear, and that was Alphonse's intermittent howl of terror coming from the center of the canoe, and even that seemed faint and unreal. Indeed the whole thing overpowered my brain, and I began to believe that I was the victim of some ghastly, spirit shaking nightmare.

CHAPTER X.

THE ROSE OF FIRE.

On we flew, drawn by the mighty current, till at last I noticed that the sound of the water was not half so deafening as it had been, and concluded that this must be because there was more room for the echoes to disperse in. I could now hear Alphonse's howls much more distinctly; they were made up of the oddest mixture of invocations to the Supreme Power and the name of his beloved Annette that it is possible to conceive; and, in short, though their evident earnestness saved them from profanity, were, to say the least, very remarkable. Taking up a paddle, I managed to drive it into his ribs, whereon he, thinking that the end had come, howled louder than ever. Then I slowly and cautiously raised myself on my knees and stretched my hand upward, but could touch no roof. Next I took the paddle and lifted it above my head as high as I could, but with the same result. I also thrust it out laterally to the right and left, but could touch nothing except water. Then I bethought me that there was in the boat, among our other remaining possessions, a bull's eye lantern and a tin of oil. I groped about and found it, and having a match on me, carefully lit it, and as soon as the flame had got a hold of the wick I turned it on down the boat. As it happened, the first thing the light lit on was the white and scared face of Alphonse, who, thinking that it was all over at last, and that he was witnessing a preliminary celestial phenomenon, gave a terrific yell, and was with difficulty reassured with the paddle. As for the other three, Good was lying on the flat of his back, his eyeglass still fixed in his eye, and gazing blankly into the upper darkness. Sir Henry had his head resting on the thwarts of the canoe, and with his hand was trying to test the speed of the water. But when the beam of light fell upon old Umslopogaas I could really have laughed. I think I have said that we had put a roast quarter of water buck into the canoe. Well, it so happened that when we all prostrated ourselves to avoid being swept out of the boat and into the water by the rock roof, Umslopogaas' head had come down uncommonly near this roast buck, and so soon as he had recovered a little from the first shock of our position it occurred to him that he was hungry. Thereupon he coolly cut off a chop with Inkosi-kaas, and was now employed in eating it, with every appearance of satisfaction. As he afterward explained, he thought that he was going "on a long journey," and preferred to start on a full stomach. It reminded me of the people who are going to be hanged, and who are generally reported in the English daily papers to have made "an excellent breakfast."

As soon as the others saw that I had managed to light up the lamp, we bundled Alphonse into the farther end of the canoe with a threat, which calmed him wonderfully, that if he would insist upon making the darkness hideous with his cries we would put him out of suspense by sending him to join the Wakwafi and wait for Annette in another sphere, and began to discuss the situation as well as we could. First, however, at Good's suggestion we bound two paddles mast fashion in the bows, so that they might give us warning against any sudden lowering of the roof of the cave or water way. It was clear to us that we were in an underground river, or, as Alphonse defined it, "main drain," which carried off the the superfluous waters of the lake. Such rivers are well known to exist in many parts of the world, but it has not often been the evil fortune of explorers to travel by them. That the river was wide we could clearly see, for the light from the bull's eye lantern failed to reach from shore to shore, although occasionally, when the current swept us either to one side or the other, we could distinguish the rock wall of the tunnel, which, as far as we could make out, appeared to arch about twenty-five feet above our heads. As for the current itself, it ran, Good estimated, at least eight knots, and fortunately for us was, as is usual, fiercest in the middle of the stream. Still, our first act was to arrange that one of us with the lantern and a pole there was in the canoe should always be in the bows ready, if possible, to prevent us from being stove in against the side of the cave or any projecting rock. Umslopogaas, having already dined, took the first turn. This was absolutely, with one exception, all that we could do towards preserving our safety. The exception was that another of us took up a position in the stern with a paddle, by means of which it was possible to steer the canoe more or less, and to keep her from the sides of the cave. These matters attended to, we made a somewhat sparing meal off the cold buck's meat (for we did not know how long it might have to last us); and then feeling in rather better spirits, I gave my opinion that, serious as it undoubtedly was, I did not consider our position altogether without hope, unless, indeed, the natives were right, and the river plunged straight down into the bowels of the earth. If not, it was clear that it must emerge somewhere, probably on the other side of the mountains, and in that case all we had to think of was to keep ourselves alive till we got there, wherever "there" might be. But, of course, as Good lugubriously pointed out, on the other hand we might fall victims to a hundred unsuspected horrors, or the river might go winding away inside the earth till it dried up, in which case our fate would indeed be an awful one.

"Well, let us hope for the best and prepare ourselves for the worst," said Sir Henry, who is always cheerful and even spirited—a very tower of strength in the time of trouble. "We have come out of so many queer scrapes together that somehow I almost fancy we shall come out of this," he added.

This was excellent advice, and we proceeded to take it each in our separate ways—that is, except Alphonse, who had by now sunk into a sort of terrified stupor. Good was at the helm and Umslopogaas in the bows, so there was nothing left for Sir Henry and myself to do except lie down in the canoe and think. It certainly was a curious, and indeed almost a weird, position to be placed in—rushing along, as we were, through the bowels of the earth, borne on the bosom of a Stygian river, something after the fashion of souls being ferried by Charon, as Curtis said. And how dark it was! the feeble ray from our little lamp did but serve to show the darkness. There in the bows sat old Umslopogaas, like Pleasure in the poem, watchful and untiring, the pole ready to his hand, and behind in the shadow I could just make out the form of Good peering forward at the ray of light in order to make out how to steer with the paddle that he held, and now and again dipped into the water.

"Well, well," thought I, "you have come in search of adventures, Allan, my boy, and you have certainly got them. At your time of life too! you ought to be ashamed of yourself, but somehow you are not; and awful as it all is, perhaps you will pull through after all; and if you don't, why, you cannot help it, you see! And when all's said and done, an underground river will make a very appropriate burying place."

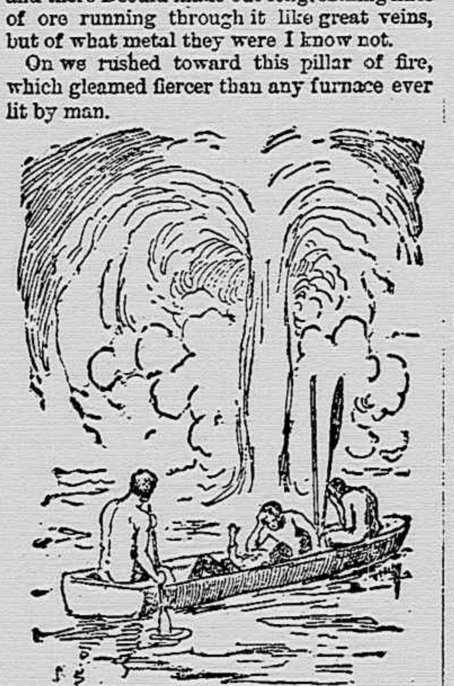
It was nearly mid day when we made our dive into darkness, and we had set our watch (Good and Umslopogaas) at 2, having agreed that it should be of a duration of five hours. At 7 o'clock, accordingly, Sir Henry and I went on, Sir Henry at the bow and I at the stern, and the other two lay down and went to sleep. For three hours all went well, Sir Henry only finding it necessary once to push us off from the side; and I that but little steering was required to keep us straight, as the violent current did all that was needed, though occasionally the canoe showed a tendency, which had to be guarded against, to veer and travel broadside on.

When I had been for three hours or so at the helm I began to notice a decided change in the temperature, which was getting warmer. At first I took no notice of it, but when at the expiration of another half hour I found that it was getting hotter and hotter, I called to Sir Henry and asked him if he noticed it or if it was only my imagination. "Noticed it!" he answered, "I should think so. I am in a sort of Turkish bath." Just about then the others woke up gasping and were obliged to begin to discard their clothes. Here Umslopogaas had the advantage, for he did not wear any to speak of except a moocha.

Hotter it grew, and hotter yet, till at last we could scarcely breathe, and the perspiration poured out of us. Half an hour more, and though we were all now stark naked we could hardly bear it. The place was like an antechamber of the infernal regions proper. I dipped my hand into the water, and drew it out almost with a cry; it was nearly boiling. We consulted a little thermometer we had—the mercury stood at 123 degs. From the surface of the water rose a dense cloud of steam. Alphonse groaned out that we were already in purgatory, which indeed we were, though not in the sense that he meant it. Sir Henry suggested that we must be passing near the seat of some underground volcanic fire, and I am inclined to think, especially in the light of what subsequently occurred, that he was right. Our sufferings for some time after this really pass my powers of description. We no longer perspired, for all the perspiration had been sweated out of us; we simply lay in the bottom of the boat, which we were now physically incapable of directing, feeling like hot embers, and I fancy undergoing very much the same sensations that the poor fish do when they are dying on land, namely, that of slow suffocation. Our skins began to crack, and the blood to throb in our heads like the beating of a steam engine.

This had been going on for some time, when suddenly the river turned a little, and I heard Sir Henry call out from the bows in a hoarse, startled voice, and looking up saw a most wonderful and awful thing. About half a mile ahead of us, and a little to the left of the center of the stream—which we could now see was about ninety feet broad—a huge pillar like jet of almost white flame rose from the surface of the water and sprang fifty feet into the air, when it struck the roof and spread out some forty feet in diameter, falling back in curved sheets of fire shaped like the petals of a full blown rose. Indeed, this awful gas jet resembled nothing so much as a great flaming flower rising out of the black water. Below was the straight stalk, a foot or more thick, and above the dreadful bloom. And as for the fearfulness of it, and its fierce and awesome beauty, who can describe it? Certainly I cannot. Although we were now some 500 yards away, it, notwithstanding the steam, lit up the whole cavern as clear as day, and we could see that the roof was here about forty feet above and washed perfectly smooth with water. The rock was black, and here and there I could make out long, shining lines of ore running through it like great veins, but of what metal they were I know not.

On we rushed toward this pillar of fire, which gleamed fiercer than any furnace ever lit by man.



On we rushed toward the pillar of fire.

"Keep the boat to the right, Quatermain—to the right," shouted Sir Henry, and a minute afterward I saw him fall forward senseless. Alphonse had already gone. Good was the next to go. There they lay as though dead; only Umslopogaas and I kept our senses. We were within fifty yards of it now, and I saw the Zulu's head fall forward on his hands. He had gone, too, and I was alone. I could not breathe; the fierce heat dried me up. For yards and yards round the great rose of fire the rock roof was red hot. The wood of the boat was almost burning. I saw the feathers on one of the dead swans begin to twist and shrivel up; but I would not give in. I knew that if I did we should pass within three or four yards of the gas jet and perish miserably. I set the paddle so as to turn the canoe as far from it as possible, and held on grimly.

My eyes seemed to be bursting from my head, and through the closed lids I could see the fierce light. We were nearly opposite now; it roared like all the fires of hell, and the water boiled furiously around it. Five seconds more. We were past; I heard the roar behind me.

Then I, too, fell senseless. The next thing that I remember was feeling a breath of air upon my face. My eyes opened with great difficulty. I looked up. Far, far above me there was light, though around me was deep gloom. Then I remembered, and looked. The canoe still floated down the river, and in the bottom of it lay the naked forms of my companions. "Were they dead?" I wondered. "Was I left alone in this awful place?" I knew not. Next I became conscious of a burning thirst. I put my hand over the edge of the boat into the water and drew it up again with a cry. No wonder; nearly all the skin was burnt off the back of it. The water, however, was cold, or nearly so, and I drank pints and splashed myself all over. My body seemed to suck up the fluid as one may see a brick wall suck up rain after a drought; but where I was burned the touch of it caused intense pain. Then I bethought myself of the others, and dragging myself towards them with difficulty, I sprinkled them with water, and to my joy they began to recover—Umslopogaas first, then the others. Next they drank, absorbing water like so many sponges. Then, feeling chilly—a queer contrast to our recent sensations—we began as best we could to get into our clothes. As we did so Good pointed to the port side of the canoe; it was all blistered with heat, and in places actually charred. Had it been built like our civilized boats, Good said that the planks would have certainly warped and let in enough water to sink us; but fortunately it was dug out of the soft, willowy wood of a single great tree, and had sides nearly three inches and a bottom four inches thick. What that awful flame was we never discovered; but I suppose that there was at this spot a crack or hole in the bed of the river through which a vast volume of gas forced its way from its volcanic home in the bowels of the earth towards the upper air. How it first became ignited it is, of course, impossible to say—probably, I should think, from some spontaneous explosion of mephitic gases.

As soon as we had got some things on and shaken ourselves together a little we set to work to make out where we were now. I have said that there was light above, and on examination we found that it came from the sky. Our river that was, Sir Henry said, a literal realization of the wild vision of the poet, was no longer underground, but was running on its darksome way, not now through "caverns measureless to man," but between two frightful cliffs which cannot have been less than 2,000 feet high. So high were they, indeed, that though the sky was above us, where we were was dense gloom—not darkness, indeed, but the gloom of a room closely shuttered in the daytime. Up on either side rose the great straight cliffs, grim and forbidding, till the eye grew dizzy with trying to measure their sheer height. The little space of sky that marked where they ended lay like a thread of blue upon their soaring blackness, which was unrelieved by any tree or creeper. Here and there, however, grew ghostly patches of a long gray lichen, hanging motionless to the rock, as the white beard to the chin of a dead man. It seemed as though only the dregs or heavier part of the light had sunk to the bottom of this awful place. No bright winged sunbeam could fall so low; they died far, far above our heads.

By the river's edge was a little shore formed of round fragments of rock washed into this shape by the constant action of water, and giving the place the appearance of being strewn with thousands of fossil cannon balls. Evidently when the water of the underground river is high there is no beach at all, or very little, between the border of the stream and the precipitous cliffs; but now there was a space of seven or eight yards. And here, on this beach, we determined to land, in order to rest ourselves a little after all that we had gone through, and to stretch our limbs. It was a dreadful place, but it would give an hour's respite from the terrors of the river, and also allow of our repacking and arranging the canoe. Accordingly we selected what looked like a favorable spot, and with some little difficulty managed to beach the canoe and scramble out on to the round, inhospitable pebbles.

"My word," called out Good, who was on shore the first, "what an awful place! it's enough to give one a fit." And he laughed.

Instantly a thundering voice took up his words, magnifying them a hundred times. "Give one a fit—ho! ho! ho!" "A fit—ho! ho! ho!" answered another voice, in wild accents, from far up the cliff. "A fit! a fit! a fit!" chimed in voice after voice, each flinging the words to and fro with shouts of awful laughter to the invisible lips of the other till the whole place echoed with the words and with shrieks of fiendish merriment, which at last ceased as suddenly as they had begun.

"Oh, mon Dieu!" yelled Alphonse, startled quite out of such self command as he possessed.

"Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu!" the Titanic echoes thundered, shrieked and wailed in every conceivable tone.

"Ah," said Umslopogaas, calmly, "I clearly perceive that devils live here. Well, the place looks like it."

I tried to explain to him that the cause of all the hubbub was a very remarkable and interesting echo, but he would not believe it.

"Ah," he said, "I know an echo when I hear one. There was one lived opposite my kraal in Zululand, and the Intombis" (maidens) "used to talk with it. But if what we hear is a full grown echo, mine at home can only have been a baby. No, no—they are devils up there. But I don't think much of them, though," he added, taking a pinch of snuff. "They can copy what one says, but they don't seem to be able to talk on their own account, and they dare not show their faces," and he relapsed into silence, and apparently paid no further attention to such contemptible fiends.

After this we found it necessary to keep our conversation down to a whisper—for it was really unbearable to have every word one uttered tossed to and fro like a tennis ball, as precipice called to precipice.

But even our whispers ran up the rocks in mysterious murmurs, till at last they died away in long drawn sighs of sound. Echoes are delightful and romantic things, but we had more than enough of them in that dreadful gulf.

As soon as we had settled ourselves a little on the round stones we proceeded to wash and dress our burns as well as we could. As we had but a little oil for the lantern we could not spare any for this purpose, so we skinned one of the swans and used the fat off its breast, which proved an excellent substitute. Then we repacked the canoe and finally began to take some food, of which I need scarcely say we were in need, for our insensibility had endured for many hours, and it was, as our watches showed, midday. Accordingly we seated ourselves in a circle, and were soon engaged in discussing our cold meat with such appetite as we could muster, which, in my case at any rate, was not much, as I felt sick and faint after my sufferings of the previous night, and had besides a racking headache. It was a curious meal. The gloom was so intense that we could scarcely see the way to cut our food and convey it to our mouths. Still we got on pretty well, although the meat was tainted by the heat through which it had passed, till I happened to look behind me—my attention being attracted by a noise of something crawling over the stones—and perceived sitting upon a rock in my immediate rear a huge species of black fresh water crab, only it was five times the size of any crab I ever saw. This hideous and loathsome looking animal had projecting eyes that seemed to glare at one, very long and flexible antennæ, or feelers, and gigantic claws. Nor was I especially favored with its company. From every quarter dozens of these horrid brutes were creeping up, drawn, I suppose, by the smell of the food from between the round stones and out of the holes in the precipice. Some were already quite close to us. I stared, quite fascinated by the unusual sight, and as I did so I saw one of the beasts stretch out its huge claw and give the unsuspecting Good such a nip that he jumped up with a howl and set the "wild echoes flying" in sober earnest. Just then, too, another, a very large one, got hold of Alphonse's leg, and declined to part with it, and, as may be imagined, a considerable scene ensued. Umslopogaas took his ax and cracked the shell of one with the flat of it, whereon it set up a horrid sort of screaming which the echoes multiplied a thousand fold, and began to foam at the mouth, a proceeding that drew hundreds more of its friends out of unsuspected holes and corners. Those on the spot, perceiving that the animal was hurt, fell upon it like creditors on a bankrupt, and literally rent it limb from limb with their huge pincers, and devoured it, using their claws to convey the fragments to their mouths. Seizing whatever weapons were handy, such as stones or paddles, we commenced a war upon the monsters, whose numbers were increasing by leaps and bounds, and whose stench was overpowering. So fast as we cracked their armor others seized the injured ones and devoured them, foaming at the mouth, and screaming as they did so. Nor did the brutes stop at that. When they could they nipped hold of us—and awful nips they were—or tried to steal the meat. One enormous fellow got hold of the swan we had skinned and began to drag it off. Instantly a score of others flung themselves upon the prey, and then began a ghastly and disgusting scene. How the monsters foamed and screamed, and rent the flesh and each other! It was a sickening and unnatural sight, and one that will haunt all who saw it till their dying day—enacted as it was in the deep, oppressive gloom, and set to the unceasing music of the many toned, nerve shaking echoes. Strange as it may seem to say so, there was something so shockingly human about these fiendish creatures—it was as though all the most evil passions and desires of man had got into the shell of a magnified crab and gone mad. They were so dreadfully courageous and intelligent, and they looked as if they understood. The whole scene might have furnished material for another canto of Dante's "Inferno," as Curtis said.

"I say, you fellows, let's get out of this, or we shall all go off our heads," sung out Good; and we were not slow to take the hint. Pushing the canoe, around which the animals were now crawling by hundreds and making vain attempts to climb, off the rocks, we bundled into it and got out into midstream, leaving behind us the fragments of our meal, and the screaming, foaming, stinking mass of monsters in full possession of the grounds.

"Those are the devils of the place," said Umslopogaas, with the air of one who has solved a problem; and, upon my word, I felt almost inclined to agree with him.

Umslopogaas' remarks were like his ax—very much to the point.

"What's to be done next?" said Sir Henry, blankly.

"Drift, I suppose," I answered, and we drifted accordingly. All the afternoon and well into the evening we floated on in the gloom beneath the far off line of blue sky, scarcely knowing when day ended and night began; for down in that vast gulf the difference was not marked, till at length Good pointed out a star hanging right above us, which, having nothing better to do, we observed with great interest. Suddenly it vanished, the darkness became intense, and a familiar murmuring sound filled the air. "Underground again," I said, with a groan, holding up the lamp. Yes, there was no doubt about it. I could just make out the roof. The chasm had come to an end and the tunnel had recommenced. And then began another long, long night of danger and horror. To describe all its incidents would be too wearisome; so I will simply say that about midnight we struck on a flat projecting rock in midstream, and were as nearly as possible overturned and drowned. However, at last we got off, and went upon the uneven tenor of our way. And so the hours passed until it was nearly 3 o'clock. Sir Henry, Good and Alphonse were asleep, utterly worn out. Umslopogaas was at the bow with the pole, and I was steering when I perceived that the rate at which we were traveling had perceptibly increased. Then, suddenly, I heard Umslopogaas make an exclamation, and next second came a sound as of parting branches, and I became aware that the canoe was being forced through hanging bushes or creepers. Another minute and a breath of sweet open air fanned my face, and I felt that we had emerged from the tunnel and were floating upon clear water. I say felt, for I could see nothing, the darkness being absolutely pitchy, as it often is just before dawn. But even this could scarcely damp my joy. We were out of that dreadful river, and wherever we might have got to, this at least was something to be thankful for. And so I sat down and inhaled the sweet night air and waited for the dawn with such patience as I could command.

CHAPTER XI.

THE FROWNING CITY.

For an hour or more I sat waiting (Umslopogaas having meanwhile gone to sleep also), till at length the east turned gray and huge misty shapes moved over the surface of the water like ghosts of long forgotten dawns. They were the vapors rising from their watery bed to greet the sun. Then the gray turned to primrose, and the primrose grew to red. Next, glorious bars of light sprang up across the eastern sky, and through them the radiant messengers of the dawn came speeding upon their arrowy way, scattering the ghostly vapors and awaking the mountains with a kiss, as they flew from range to range and longitude to longitude. Another moment, and the golden gates were open, and the sun himself came forth as a bridegroom from his chamber, with pomp and glory and a flashing as of 10,000,000 spears, and embraced the night and covered her with brightness, and it was day.

But as yet I could see nothing save the beautiful blue sky above; for over the water was a thick layer of mist exactly as though the whole surface had been covered with billows of cotton wool. By degrees, however, the sun sucked up the mists, and then I saw that we were afloat upon a glorious sheet of blue water, of which I could not make out the shore. Some eight or ten miles behind us, however, there stretched as far as the eye could reach a range of precipitous hills that formed a retaining wall of the lake, and I have no doubt but that it was through some entrance in these hills that the subterranean river found its way into the open water. Indeed, I afterwards ascertained this to be the fact; and it will be some indication of the extraordinary strength and directness of the current of the mysterious river that the canoe, even at this distance, was still answering to it. Presently, too, I, or rather Umslopogaas, who woke up just then, discovered another indication, and a very unpleasant one it was. Perceiving some whitish object upon the water, Umslopogaas called my attention to it, and with a few strokes of the paddle brought the canoe to the spot, whereupon we discovered that the object was the body of a man floating face downward. This was bad enough, but imagine my horror when Umslopogaas having turned him on to his back with the paddle we recognized in the sunken features the lineaments of—whom do you suppose? None other than our poor servant who had been sucked down two days before in the waters of the subterranean river. It quite frightened me. I thought that we had left him behind forever; and behold! borne by the current, he had made the awful journey with us, and with us had reached the end. His appearance also was dreadful, for he bore traces of having touched the pillar of fire—one arm being completely shriveled up, and all his hair being burnt off. The features were, as I have said, sunken, and yet they preserved upon them that awful look of despair that I had seen upon his living face as the poor fellow was sucked down. Really the sight unnerved me, weary and shaken as I felt with all that we had gone through, and I was heartily glad, when suddenly, and without any warning, the body began to sink just as though it had had a mission, which having been accomplished, it retired; the real reason, no doubt, being that turning it on its back, allowed a free passage to the gas. Down it went into the transparent depths—fathom after fathom we could trace its course, till at last a long line of bright air bubbles, swiftly chasing each other to the surface, alone remained where it had passed. At length these too were gone, and that was an end of our poor servant. Umslopogaas thoughtfully watched the body vanish.

"What did he follow us for?" he asked. "'Tis an ill omen for thee and me, Macumazahn." And he laughed.

I turned on him angrily, for I dislike these unpleasant suggestions. If people have such ideas they ought in common decency to keep them to themselves. I detest individuals who make one the subject of their disagreeable presentiments, or who, when they dream that they saw one hanged as a common felon, or some such horror, will insist upon telling one all about it at breakfast, even if they have to get up early to do it.

Just then, however, the others woke up and began to rejoice exceedingly at finding that we were out of that dreadful river and once more beneath the blue sky.

When we had been sailing for an hour Good, who was searching the horizon with a spyglass, suddenly announced joyfully that he saw land, and pointed out that, from the change in the color of the water, he thought we must be approaching the mouth of a river. In another minute we perceived a great golden dome, not unlike that of St. Paul's, piercing the morning mists, and while we were wondering what in the world it could be, Good reported another and still more important discovery, namely, that a small sailing boat was advancing toward us. This bit of news, which we were very shortly able to verify with our own eyes, threw us into a considerable flutter. That the natives of this unknown lake should understand the art of sailing seemed to suggest that they possessed some degree of civilization. In a few more minutes it became evident that the occupant or occupants of the advancing boat had made us out. For a moment or two she hung in the wind as though in doubt, and then came tacking toward us with great swiftness. In ten more minutes she was within a hundred yards, and we saw that she was a neat little boat—not a canoe "dugout," but built more or less in European fashion with planks, and carrying a singularly large sail for her size. But our attention was soon diverted from the boat to her crew, which consisted of a man and woman nearly as white as ourselves.

We stared at each other in amazement, thinking that we must be mistaken; but no, there was no doubt about it. They were not fair, but the two people in the boat were decidedly of a white as distinguished from a black race—as white, for instance, as Spaniards or Italians. It was a patent fact. So it was true, after all; and, mysteriously led by a Power beyond our own, we had discovered this wonderful people. I could have shouted for joy when I thought of the glory and the wonder of the thing; and as it was, we all shook hands and congratulated each other on the unexpected success of our wild search. All my life had I heard rumors of a white race that existed in the highlands of the interior of this vast continent, and longed to put them to the proof, and now here I saw it with my own eyes and was dumfounded. Truly, as Sir Henry said, the old Roman was right when he wrote: "Ex Africa semper aliquid novi," which he tells me means that out of Africa there always comes some new thing.

The man in the boat was of a good but not particularly fine physique, and had straight, black hair, regular aquiline features, and an intelligent face. He was dressed in a brown cloth garment, something like a flannel shirt without the sleeves, and in an unmistakable kilt of the same material. The legs and feet were bare. Round the right arm and left leg he wore thick rings of yellow metal that I judged to be of gold. The woman had a sweet face, wild and shy, with large eyes and curling brown hair. Her dress was made of the same material as the man's, and consisted, as we afterwards discovered, first of a linen under garment that hung down to her knee, and then of a single long strip of cloth, about four feet wide by fifteen long, which was wound round the body in graceful folds and finally flung over the left shoulder so that the end, which was dyed blue or purple or some other color, according to the social standing of the wearer, hung down in front, the right arm and breast being, however, left quite bare. A more becoming dress, especially when, as in the present case, the wearer was young and pretty, is quite impossible to conceive. Good, who has an eye for such things, was greatly struck with it, and so indeed was I. It was so simple and yet so effective.

Meanwhile, if we had been astonished at the appearance of the man and woman, it was clear that they were far more astonished at us. As for the man, he appeared to be overcome with fear and wonder, and for a while hovered round our canoe, but would not approach. At last, however, he came within hailing distance, and called to us in a language that sounded soft and pleasing enough, but of which we could not understand one word. So we hailed back in English, French, Latin, Greek, German, Zulu, Dutch, Sisutu, Kukuana, and a few other native dialects that I am acquainted with, but our visitor did not understand any of these tongues; indeed, they appeared to bewilder him. As for the lady, she was busily employed in taking stock of us, and Good was returning the compliment by staring at her hard through his eyeglass, a proceeding that she seemed rather to enjoy than otherwise. At length the man, being unable to make anything out of us, suddenly headed his boat round and began to head off for the shore, his little boat skimming away before the wind like a swallow. As she passed across our bows, the man turned to attend to the large sail; and Good promptly took the opportunity to kiss his hand to the young lady. I was horrified at this proceeding both on general grounds and because I feared that she might take offense, but to my delight she did not, for, first glancing round and seeing that her husband, or brother, or whoever it was, was engaged, she promptly kissed hers back.

"Ah!" said I, "it seems that we have at last found a language that the people of this country understand."

"In which case," said Sir Henry, "Good will prove an invaluable interpreter."

I frowned, for I do not approve of Good's frivolities, and he knows it, and I turned the conversation to more serious subjects. "It is very clear to me," I said, "that the man will be back before long with a host of his fellows, so that we had best make up our minds as to how we are going to receive them."

"The question is, how will they receive us?" said Sir Henry.

As for Good, he made no remark, but began to extract a small square tin case that had accompanied us in all our wanderings from under a pile of baggage. Now, we had often remonstrated with Good about this tin case, inasmuch as it had been an awkward thing to carry, and he had never given any very explicit account as to its contents; but he had insisted on keeping it, saying mysteriously that it might come in very useful one day.

"What on earth are you going to do, Good?" asked Sir Henry.

"Do?—why dress, of course! You don't expect me to appear in a new country in these things, do you?" and he pointed to his soiled and worn garments, which were, however, like all Good's things, very tidy, and with every tear neatly mended.

We said no more, but watched his proceedings with breathless interest. His first step was to get Alphonse, who was thoroughly competent in such matters, to trim his hair and beard in the most approved fashion. I think that if he had had some hot water and a cake of soap at hand he would have shaved off the latter, but he had not. This done, he suggested that we should lower the sail of the canoe and all take a bath, which we did, greatly to the horror and astonishment of Alphonse, who lifted his hands and ejaculated that these English were indeed a wonderful people. Umslopogaas, who, though he was, like most high bred Zulus, scrupulously cleanly in his person, did not see the fun of swimming about in a lake, also regarded the proceeding with mild amusement. We got back into the canoe much refreshed by the cold water and sat to dry in the sun, while Good undid his tin box and produced first a beautiful clean white shirt, just as it had left a London steam laundry, and then some garments wrapped first in brown, then in white, and finally in silver paper. We watched this undoing with the tenderest interest and much speculation. One by one Good removed the dull husks that held their splendors, carefully folding and replacing each piece of paper as he did so; and there at last lay, in all the majesty of its gold epaulets, lace and buttons, a commander of the royal navy's full dress uniform—dress sword, cocked hat, shiny patent leather boots and all. We literally gasped.

"What!" we said, "what! Are you going to put those things on?"

"Certainly," he answered, composedly: "you see so much depends upon a first impression, especially," he added, "as I observe that there are ladies about. One at least of us ought to be decently dressed."

We said no more; we were simply dumfounded, especially when we considered the artful way in which Good had concealed the contents of that box for all these months. Only one suggestion did we make, namely, that he should wear his mail shirt next his skin. He replied that he feared it would spoil the set of his coat, now carefully spread in the sun to take the creases out, but finally consented to this precautionary measure. The most amusing part of the affair, however, was to see old Umslopogaas' astonishment and Alphonse's delight at Good's transformation. When at last he stood up in all his glory, even down to the medals on his breast, and contemplated himself in the still waters of the lake, after the fashion of the young gentleman in ancient history, whose name I can't remember, but who fell in love with his own shadow, the old Zulu could no longer restrain his feelings.

"Oh, Bougwan!" he said: "Oh, Bougwan! I always thought thee an ugly little man, and fat—fat as the cows at calving time; and now thou art like a blue jay when he spreads his tail out. Surely, Bougwan, it hurts my eyes to look at thee."

Good did not much like this allusion to his fat, which, to tell the truth, was not very well deserved, for hard exercise had brought him down four inches; but on the whole he was pleased at Umslopogaas' admiration. As for Alphonse, he was quite delighted.

"Ah! but monsieur has the beautiful air—the air of the warrior. It is the ladies who will say so when we come to get ashore. Monsieur is complete; he puts me in mind of my heroic grand"——

Here we stopped Alphonse.

As we gazed upon the beauties thus revealed by Good a spirit of emulation filled our breasts, and we set to work to get ourselves up as well as we could. The most, however, that we were able to do was to array ourselves in our spare suits of shooting clothes, of which we each had one, keeping on our mail shirts underneath. As for my appearance, all the fine clothes in the world could never make it otherwise than scrubby and insignificant; but Sir Henry looked what he is, a magnificent man in his nearly new tweed suit, gaiters and boots. Alphonse also got himself up to kill, giving an extra turn to his enormous mustaches. Even old Umslopogaas, who was not in a general way given to the vain adorning of his body, took some oil out of the lantern and a bit of tow, and polished up his head ring with it till it shone like Good's patent leather boots. Then he put on the mail shirt Sir Henry had given him and his "moocha," and having cleaned up Inkosi-kaas a little, stood forth complete.

All this while, having hoisted the sail again as soon as we had finished bathing, we had been progressing steadily for the land, or, rather, for the mouth of a great river. Presently—in all about an hour and a half after the little boat had left us—we saw emerging from the river or harbor a large number of boats, ranging up to ten or twelve tons burden. One of these was propelled by twenty-four oars, and most of the rest sailed. Looking through the glass we soon made out that the row boat was an official vessel, her crew being all dressed in a sort of uniform, while on the half deck forward stood an old man of venerable appearance and with a flowing white beard and a sword strapped to his side, who was evidently the commander of the craft. The other boats were apparently occupied by people brought out by curiosity, and were rowing or sailing toward us as quickly as they could.

"Now for it," said I. "What is the betting? Are they going to be friendly or to put an end to us?"

Nobody could answer this question, and not liking the warlike appearance of the old gentleman and his sword, we felt a little anxious.

Just then Good spied a school of hippopotami on the water about 200 yards off us, and suggested that it would not be a bad plan to impress the natives with a sense of our power by shooting some of them if possible. This, unluckily enough, struck us as a good idea, and accordingly we at once got out our eight bore rifles, for which we still had a few cartridges left, and prepared for action. There were four of the animals—a big bull, a cow, and two young ones, one three parts grown. We got up to them without difficulty, the great animals contenting themselves with sinking down into the water and rising again a few yards farther on; indeed, their excessive tameness struck me as being peculiar. When the advancing boats were about 500 yards away Sir Henry opened the ball by firing at the three parts grown young one. The heavy bullet struck it fair between the eyes and crashing through the skull, killed it, and it sank, leaving a long train of

CONTINUED ON FOURTH PAGE.